

# Yabem language

**Yabem**, or **Jabêm**, is an Austronesian language of Papua New Guinea.

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	<b>Yabem</b>
	Jabêm
<b>Native to</b>	Papua New Guinea
<b>Region</b>	Finschhafen District, Morobe Province
<b>Native speakers</b>	(2,100 cited 1978) <sup>[1]</sup>
<b>Language family</b>	Austronesian <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Malayo-Polynesian</li> <li>▪ Oceanic</li> <li>▪ Western Oceanic</li> <li>▪ North New Guinea ?</li> <li>▪ Ngero-Vitiaz ?</li> <li>▪ Huon Gulf</li> <li>▪ North Huon Gulf</li> <li>▪ <b>Yabem</b></li> </ul>
	<b>Language codes</b>
<b>ISO 639-3</b>	jae
<b>Glottolog</b>	yabe1254 ( <a href="http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/yabe1254">http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/yabe1254</a> ) <sup>[2]</sup>

## Overview

Yabem belongs to the division of the Melanesian languages<sup>[3]</sup> spoken natively (in 1978) by about 2,000 people at Finschhafen, which is on the southern tip of the Huon Peninsula in Morobe Province, Papua New Guinea, despite historical evidence that shows that the language originated in the northern coast.<sup>[4]</sup> However, Yabem was adopted as local lingua franca along with Kâte<sup>[5]</sup> for evangelical and educational

purposes by the German Lutheran missionaries who first arrived at Simbang, a Yabem-speaking village, in 1885.<sup>[6]</sup> Yabem was the first language for which the missionaries created a writing system because it was the first language that they encountered when they arrived. They even created a school system to provide education for the Yabem community.

By 1939, it was spoken by as many as 15,000 people and understood by as many as 100,000 (Zahn 1940). In the decade after World War II, the mission's network of schools managed to educate 30,000 students by using Yabem as the medium of instruction (Streicher 1982). Although the usage of Yabem as a local lingua franca was replaced by Tok Pisin, which was used in informal everyday life, such as religious meetings and the workplace,<sup>[7]</sup> and English, which was used in more formal institutions like education and government in the 1950s,<sup>[5]</sup> Yabem remains one of the best-documented Austronesian languages, with extensive instructional and liturgical materials (including many original compositions, not just translations from German or English) as well as grammars and dictionaries. The government wanted an easier assimilation to Western culture and values and access to their superior educational resources and so English was the most efficient language of instruction.<sup>[8]</sup>

Still, the transition from the usage of Kâte and Yabem, which are languages with local origins, to Tok Pisin and English, which are languages with foreign origins, affected the dynamic of the people and their view of language and the church somewhat negatively.

Yabem also shares a close relationship with the Kela and Bukawa languages.<sup>[4]</sup> In fact, many people who speak Bukawa also speak Yabem.

Ethnologue classifies the language's status as "threatened."<sup>[9]</sup> Its alternative names include Laulabu, Jabem, Jabêm, Jabim, Yabim, and Yabêm.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Phonology

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### Vowels (orthographic)

Yabem distinguishes seven vowel qualities.

	Front	Central	Back
<u>High</u>	i		u
<u>Upper mid</u>	ê		ô
<u>Lower mid</u>	e		o
<u>Low</u>		a	

### Consonants (orthographic)

The glottal stop, written with a -c, is distinctive only at the end of syllables. The only other consonants that can occur there are labials and nasals: p, b, m, ñ. The liquid /l/ is realized as either a flap [ɾ] or a lateral [l]. Syllable-structure constraints are most easily explained if labialized and prenasalized consonants are considered to be unit phonemes rather than clusters. However, Otto Dempwolff, who greatly influenced the German missionary orthographies in New Guinea, apparently did not sanction labialized labials, preferring instead to signal rounding on labials by the presence of a round mid vowel (-o- or -ô-) between the labial consonant and the syllable nucleus, as in vs. ômôêŋ 'you'll come' vs. ômêŋ 'he'll come' or ômôa 'you'll dwell' vs. ômac 'you'll be sick' (Dempwolff 1939). (Compare the orthographies of Sio and Kâte.)

	<u>Bilabial</u>	<u>Coronal</u>	<u>Velar</u>	<u>Glottal</u>
<u>Voiceless stop</u>	p / po-/pô-	t	k / kw	-c
<u>Voiced stop</u>	b / bo-/bô-	d	g / gw	
<u>Prenasalized</u>	mb / mbo-/mbô-	nd	ŋg / ŋgw	
<u>Nasal</u>	m / mo-/mô-	n	ŋ	
<u>Fricative</u>		s		
<u>Lateral</u>		l		
<u>Approximant</u>	w	j		

## Tone

Yabem has a simple system of register tone that distinguishes high-tone syllables from low-tone ones. In the standard orthography, high-tone syllables are unmarked, and the nuclei of low-tone syllables are marked with a grave accent, as in *oc* 'sun' vs. *òc* 'my foot' or *uc* 'breadfruit' vs. *ùc* 'hunting net'. Tone distinctions in Yabem appear to be of relatively recent origin (Bradshaw 1979) and still correlate strongly with obstruent voicing contrasts (but not in its closest relative, Bukawa). Only high tones occur in syllables with voiceless obstruents (*p, t, k*), and only low tone occurs in syllables with voiced obstruents (*b, d, g*). The fricative /s/ is voiced in low-tone syllables but voiceless in high-tone syllables. Other phonemes are neutral with respect to tone and so occur in both high-tone or low-tone environments.

## Lexical categories

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Yabem has nouns, verbs, adjectives, pronouns and adverbs. Some categories, such as verbs and nouns, are distinguishable by the types of morphology that they are able to take.

Yabem nouns can take inalienable possessive suffixes, distinguishing person, number and inclusivity/exclusivity. Alienable possessives are indicated by a juxtaposed possessive word. Nouns can also take "affective" suffixes that indicate a speaker's attitude toward that thing: sympathy, affection or ridicule. Examples are from Bradshaw & Czobor (2005) unless otherwise stated:

ηac

'man'

ηac-èc

man-DIM

'dear little man'

gwad-êc

cousin-1SG.POSS

'my cousin'

gwad-êc-sìgo

cousin-1SG.POSS-RID

'my stupid cousin'

Verbs are distinguishable by their prefixes. They can take pronominal prefixes to indicate person, number, and irrealis/realis mode, as can be seen above in the Morphology section.

kê-poa

3SG-break

'it breaks'

Some words can function as either nouns or verbs and thus take either nominal or verbal morphology:

lac

'a sail'

ŋoc lac

1SG.POSS-sail

'my sail'

ta-lac

1PL-sail

'we sail'

Most of these are derived from the sense of the noun originally, though some appear to be derived from actions expressed by verbs:

ta-ômac

1PL-laugh

'we laugh'

ômac

'laughter'

## **Grammatical relations and alignment**

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Yabem has a nominative-accusative system of alignment, as is evidenced by the pronominal prefixes that appear on verbs that always mark the subject of either a transitive or intransitive verb. There is no case-marking on the nominals themselves, and word order is typically SVO. Examples are from Bradshaw & Czobor (2005:10-34) unless otherwise noted<sup>[11]</sup>:

ga-sô tuŋ  
1SG-tie fence  
'I tied the fence'

ga-ŋgôŋ  
1SG-sit  
'I remain'

Subject prefixes can also occur with full subject pronouns, as is shown in the example below. Both bolded morphemes refer to the first-person singular.

aê **ga**-ŋô aômnêm biŋ atom  
1SG 1SG-hear 2SG.POSS talk NEG  
'I didn't hear your speech'

Word order (SVO) is another marker of the nominative/accusative system. Below, the first person singular free pronoun precedes the first whether it is the subject of an intransitive verb or the agent of a transitive verb.

aê ga-jam  
1SG 1SG-make.thanks  
'I give thanks'

aê ge-no mo  
1SG 1SG-cook taro  
'I cook taro'

## Voice and valency

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Yabem, like many other languages of the area, both Oceanic and Papuan, has no passive voice. There is also no morphological method to create a causative. Detransitivization can be accomplished via periphrastic reflexive/reciprocal phrases, as can be seen below. Example is from Bradshaw (1999:289-91).<sup>[12]</sup>

ma sê-kic bing sê-wing taung  
and 3PL-bind word 3PL-join selves  
'and they planned together' (Lit: 'They bound words and joined each other')

ma sê-sam taung se-be Sibôma  
and 3PL-call selves 3PL-say Sibôma  
'and they called themselves Sibôma'

## Morphological typology

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Yabem shows elements of morphological fusion and agglutination but is not very high in either respect. The primary factor determinative of fusion/agglutination degree is lexical category. Verbs, for example, take subject prefixes, which fusingly mark person, number, inclusivity (for the first person plural), realis/irrealis, and high- and have low-tone variants. Nouns also display low levels of agglutination, sometimes taking possessive suffixes. Verbal derivation is not something that occurs morphologically although nominalization does so. Some derivational morphology for nominalization can be seen below in building a noun via the agentive suffix. In the second example, the patient of a verb (in this case -àwêwàga 'woman') is combined with the agent (here *ŋac* 'man') to construct an agentive nominalized form. Examples are from Bradshaw & Czobor (2005:30)<sup>[11]</sup>

ge-job-wàga  
3SG-guards-AGEN  
'guardian'  
ŋac-gebe-ênam-àwêwàga  
man-3SG.wants-he.takes-woman

'bridegroom'

## Relative clauses

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Relative clauses are created by use of the demonstrative pronouns/adjectives, which come in several forms themselves.

First series	<i>tonec</i>	<i>onec</i>	<b><i>tec</i></b>	<b><i>nec</i></b>
Second series	<i>tonaŋ</i>	<i>onan̄/ônan̄</i>	<b><i>taŋ</i></b>	<b><i>naŋ</i></b>
Third series	<i>tone</i>	<i>ônê</i>	<b><i>tê</i></b>	<b><i>nê</i></b>

The three series above represent three degrees of proximity in the demonstratives. First series correlates to something nearest or most relevant to the 1st person (the speaker), and the second series corresponded to the 2nd person (addressee), while the third series corresponds to what is nearest or most relevant to the 3rd person (non-speech act participant). The forms beginning with *t-* are those that offer a specific or precise degree of evidentiality (with regard to the referent). Examples of this degree of precision can be seen below.<sup>[11]</sup>

ηac tonec

man PROX

'this man (near me, whom I know)'

moc onec

bird PROX

'this bird (that I heard, but cannot point out now)'

sê-moa onaŋ

3PL-stay DIST

'they stay there (near you, but not visible)'

The bolded forms in the above table are the short forms of these demonstratives. They are phonologically reduced but carry no difference in meaning from the long forms. It is these short demonstratives that are used to create relative clauses. The three degrees of proximity as well as the two degrees of evidential precision still come into play when these forms are used as relative pronouns.

aê **tec** ga-moa amâc ηa-sawa **nec** ka-tôm ηac-gê-jam-sakin̄-wàga

1SG tec 1SG-stay 2SG 3SG.POSS-middle NEC 1SG-suffice man-3SG-do-service-agen

'I who dwell in your midst am also one who serves'

ô-sôm biŋ mo-wê̄-ŋa ê-ndêŋ àwê **taŋ** gê-ngôŋ malac

2sg.irr-speak word taro-root-gen 3sg-reach woman taŋ 3sg-sit village

'talk about taro shoots to the woman sitting in the village'

aêac a-pi waŋ **taŋ** dêbu-c

1pl 1pl-ascend canoe tan grandfather-1sg.poss

'we'll board a canoe whose sideboards

*ke-to ña-lêsiñ nañ*

3sg-paint 3sg.poss-sideboard nañ

my grandfather painted'

It is of note that the t- pronoun may precede the n- form, or two n-/n- forms may co-occur, but the n- form may never precede the t- form. This means that tan...nañ and nañ...tan are acceptable but not \*nañ...tan.

## Serial verb constructions

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Yabem has a rich serial verb construction system (SVC). It incorporates both different subject (switch-subject) SVCs and same subject SVCs. The SVC system is symmetrical. The two verbs of the SVC must agree in mode (realis/irrealis) and must have the same object if they are transitive. Semantic usages include directionals, resultatives, causatives, comitatives and adverbial modifiers:

*sê-janda moc sê-moa gwêc*

3pl-hunt bird 3pl-stay at.sea

'they hunted birds at sea'

*sê-lac sê-na gwêc*

3pl-sail 3pl-go at.sea

'they'll sail out to sea'

*ta-sêwa ñop ê-nêc malaclùñ*

1pl.incl-pour.out betel.lime 3sg.irr-lie village.plaza

'we'll pour out the betel lime in the village plaza'

*ka-siñ i ga-wiñ teo-c-àc*

1sg-catch fish 1sg-accompany older.brother-1sg.poss-coll

'I caught fish with my older brothers'

## Morphology

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### Pronouns and person markers

#### Free pronouns

First person plural inclusive and exclusive are not distinguished in the free pronouns, but are distinguished in the subject prefixes and the genitives.

<u>Person</u>	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>	<u>Dual</u>
<b>1st person inclusive</b>		aêàc	aêàgêc
<b>1st person exclusive</b>	aê	aêàc	aêàgêc
<b>2nd person</b>	aôm	amàc	amàgêc
<b>3rd person</b>	en	êseàc	êseàgêc

## Genitive pronouns

The short, underdifferentiated genitive forms are often disambiguated by adding the free pronoun in front.

<u>Person</u>	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
<b>1st person inclusive</b>		(aêàc) nêŋ
<b>1st person exclusive</b>	(aê) ñoc	(aêàc) ma
<b>2nd person</b>	(aôm) nêm	(amàc) nêm
<b>3rd person</b>	(en) nê	(êseàc) nêŋ

## Subject prefixes on verbs

Verbs are prefixed to show the person and number of their subjects. (The 1st person plural exclusive and 2nd person plural prefixes are homophonous but can be disambiguated by using the free pronouns in subject position.) The singular prefixes also distinguish Realis and Irrealis mood (which usually translates to Nonfuture vs. Future tense). Each prefix also has a high-tone (H) and a low-tone (L) allomorph to meet the tone requirements of each of five conjugation classes.<sup>[13]</sup>

<u>Person</u>	<u>Singular Realis (H/L)</u>	<u>Singular Irrealis (H/L)</u>	<u>Plural Realis=Irrealis (H/L)</u>
<b>1st person inclusive</b>			ta-/da-
<b>1st person exclusive</b>	ka-/ga-	ja-/jà-	a-/à-
<b>2nd person</b>	kô-/gô-	ô-/ô`-	a-/à-
<b>3rd person</b>	kê-/gê-	ê-/ê`-	sê-/sê`-

## Possessed nouns

### Alienable vs. inalienable possession

Preposed genitive pronouns are used to mark alienable possession by humans, as in *ñoc àndu* 'my house', *nêm i* 'your fish', *nê jàc* 'his brother-in-law (wife's brother)'. Inalienable possession is marked by suffixes directly on the nouns denoting the possessions, which are typically kinship relations and body parts. The underdifferentiated suffixes are often disambiguated by adding the free pronoun in front of the suffixed noun. The final *-i* on the plurals of kin terms is a distributive marker, indicating some but not all of the class to which the noun refers.<sup>[11]:21–29</sup>

'cross-cousin'	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
<b>1st person inclusive</b>		gwadêŋi
<b>1st person exclusive</b>	gwadêc	gwadêŋi
<b>2nd person</b>	gwadêm	gwadêmi
<b>3rd person</b>	gwadê	gwadêŋi

'body'	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
<b>1st person inclusive</b>		ôlinj
<b>1st person exclusive</b>	ôlic	ôlinj
<b>2nd person</b>	ôlim	ôlim
<b>3rd person</b>	ôli	ôlinj

## Inherent possession

Genitive relations for other than humans are not marked by either the genitive pronouns (for alienables) or the genitive suffixes (for inalienables). Instead, inherent possession of nouns as progeny or parts of wholes is marked by a prefix *ŋa-*, as in (*ka*) *ŋalaka* '(tree) branch', (*lôm*) *ŋatau* '(men's house) owner', and (*talec*) *ŋalatu* '(hen's) chick'. The same is true of adjectives (attributes of other entities) when derived from nouns, as in *ŋadani* 'thick, dense' (< *dani* 'thicket') or *ŋalemonj* 'muddy, soft' (< *lemonj* 'mud').<sup>[11]:26–31</sup>

## Other genitive constructions

Nouns denoting persons use a genitive suffix of *-nê* in the singular and *-nêŋj*.<sup>[11]</sup>

*Apômtau-nê intêna*

lord-gen his.way

'of the lord's way'

The plural version of the suffix is applied to plural nouns or singular nouns that are plural in meaning.

*lau-nêŋj kôm*

people-gen field

'the people's field'

## Compounds

Compound nouns are often composed of two parts, the first of which is the genitive of the second.<sup>[11]</sup>

*ja-dauŋj*

fire-smoke

'smoke of a fire'

Sometimes the compounds are metaphorical in their meaning.

*bu-mata*

water-eye

'spring (of water)'

Some compounds include a possessive suffix on the first element of the compound.

*môkê-c-lauŋ*

head-1s.poss-hair

'my head's hair' = 'my head hair'

*lusô-m-sùŋ*

nose-2s.poss-hole

'your nose's hole' = 'your nostril'

Some elements of these body part compounds exist only within the compound.

*bô-c-dagi*

?-1s.poss-chest

'my chest'

*bô-n-dagi*

?-2s.poss-chest

'your chest'

*tê- Ø-tac*

belly-3s.poss-?

'his belly'

*tê-n-tac*

belly-2s.poss-?

'your belly'

Less common are compounds that do not express possessive, but some other kind of genitive relationship, such as apposition.

*lau-sin*

people-sword/fight

lit. 'people of the sword' = 'warriors'

*nom-ku*

earth-pot

'clay for pots'

## Numerals

Traditional counting practices started with the digits of one hand, then continued on the other hand, and then the feet to reach '20', which translates as 'one person'. Higher numbers are multiples of 'one person'. Nowadays, most counting above '5' is done in Tok Pisin. As in other [Huon Gulf languages](#), an alternate form of the numeral '1' (*teŋ*) functions as an indefinite article. The numeral *luagēc* '2' can similarly function as an indefinite plural indicating 'a couple, a few, some'. The numeral root *ta* '1' suffixed with the adverbial marker *-geŋ* renders 'one, only one', while the numeral '2' similarly suffixed (*luagēc-geŋ*) renders 'only a few'. Reduplicated numerals form distributives: *tageŋ-tageŋ* 'one by one', *tēlēāc-tēlēāc* 'in threes', etc.<sup>[11]:52–54</sup>

Numeral	Term	Gloss
1	<i>ta(-gen)</i> / <i>teŋ</i>	'one-ADV' / 'a(n)'
2	<i>luagēc</i>	'two'
3	<i>tēlēāc</i>	'three'
4	<i>àclē</i>	'four'
5	<i>lemeŋ-teŋ</i>	'hand-one'
6	<i>lemeŋ-teŋ</i> <i>ŋanō</i> <i>ta</i>	'hand-one fruit one'
7	<i>lemeŋ-teŋ</i> <i>ŋanō</i> <i>luagēc</i>	'hand-one fruit two'
8	<i>lemeŋ-teŋ</i> <i>ŋanō</i> <i>tēlēāc</i>	'hand-one fruit three'
9	<i>lemeŋ-teŋ</i> <i>ŋanō</i> <i>àclē</i>	'hand-one fruit four'
10	<i>lemeŋ-lu</i> ~ <i>lemelu</i>	'hands-two'
11	<i>lemeŋ-lu</i> <i>ŋanō</i> <i>ta</i>	'hands-two fruit one'
15	<i>lemeŋ-lu</i> <i>ŋa-lemeŋ-teŋ</i>	'hands-two its-hands-one'
20	<i>ŋac teŋ</i>	'man one'

## Vocabulary

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Due to the limited amount of consonants and vowels in the Yabem language, pronunciation is critical in order to get the correct meaning across. In some cases, simply changing the accent on a letter can change the meaning of a word entirely.<sup>[5]</sup>

Numeral	Meaning of word	IPA
1	'man'	ŋa?
2	'your mother's brother'	sa-m <sa- 'mother's brother' + -m 'your (singular)'
3	'she/he ate'	g-ɛŋ < g (ɛ) - 'third person singular subject, realis'; -ɛŋ 'eat'
4	'possum'	moyaŋ
5	'your mother'	tena-m
6	'I spoke'	ka-som
7	'I walked'	ka-selenŋ
8	'he will carry'	e-tolŋ
9	'valuables'	awÁ
10	'(his/her) mouth'	awÀ
11	'outside'	awÉ
12	'woman'	awÈ
13	'body'	olÍ
14	'wages	olÌ
15	'prohibition'	yaÓ
16	'enmity'	yaÒ
17	'mango'	wÁ
18	'crocodile'	wÀ
19	'hammer (verb)'	-sÁ?
20	to put on top of	-sÀ?
21	'careless'	paliŋ
22	'far away'	balinŋ
23	'shell'	piŋ
24	'speech'	biŋ
25	'all at once'	típ
26	'thud'	díp
27	'service'	sakiŋ
28	'house partition'	saginŋ
29	'I called out'	ka-kÚŋ
30	'I speared (something)'	ga-gÙŋ
31	'I provoked trouble'	ka-kilÍ
32	'I stepped over (s.t.)'	ka-gelÍ
33	'I dwelt'	ga-m"À

\*Table taken from Tonogenesis in the North Huon Gulf Chain by Malcolm D. Ross [14]

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## External links

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- Yabem Wordlist at the Austronesian Basic Vocabulary Database (<http://language.psy.auckland.ac.nz/austronesian/language.php?id=334>)
- Paradisec has two collections of Arthur Capell's materials (AC1 (<http://catalog.paradisec.org.au/collections/AC1>), AC2 (<http://catalog.paradisec.org.au/collections/AC2>)), which include Yabem language materials
- Paradisec's Malcolm Ross collection includes Yabem language materials (<http://catalog.paradisec.org.au/collections/MR1>)
- Paradisec's collection of Meinrad Scheller's field recordings includes Yabem language materials (<http://catalog.paradisec.org.au/collections/MS2>)

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- [Yabem Wordlist](http://language.psy.auckland.ac.nz/austronesian/language.php?id=334) (<http://language.psy.auckland.ac.nz/austronesian/language.php?id=334>) at the Austronesian Basic Vocabulary Database

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